

Bringing light to Afghan girls

Mention Razia Jan's name in Duxbury and you'll be greeted with smiles. For years, Jan owned a dry cleaning and seamstress shop in town, where she could turn out the most intricate designs. In the days following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, she made fleece blankets with the American flag pattern. She then organized town residents and school children to buy and cut fabric for hundreds of blankets, which she sewed and distributed to fire houses and other first responders at the World Trade Center in New York.

She also made two enormous quilts, each bearing an imprinted photo and short biography for every person killed in the attacks on the Pentagon: 125 in the building, 59 on American Airlines Flight 77. She presented the quilts at the rebuilt Pentagon chapel.

Jan is an Afghan native who moved

to the United States in 1970 to attend college; her brother was at MIT. She became an American citizen, had a son, settled in Marshfield, and opened her Duxbury business. When the Sept. 11 attacks occurred, she was as horrified as any other American citizen.

"I'm Muslim," she says, "and Islam is a very peaceful religion. Terrorists have no place in Islam; they're evil, and evil has no place in any religion."

Five years ago, Jan decided that what her benighted homeland needed most of all was to educate its girls — something

Three years ago, Jan moved back to Afghanistan to be closer to the school, but she still owns her Marshfield home and gets back here every several months to see her son, a director in Los Angeles, her brother in Washington, D.C., and to fund-raise. This week, she spoke at a forum sponsored by the Duxbury Rotary Club, where she is still a member. She brought along wares to sell for the school: jackets, scarves, jewelry, and bookmarks made by the girls, with their pictures on them.

In the spring, she will be back to speak and fund-raise in Wellesley and Concord, which have also been generous to the cause. That's because the school's executive director is Patti Quigley, whose husband, Patrick, was on United Airlines Flight 175, which crashed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. Quigley, who lives in Wellesley, had started an organization with another Sept. 11 widow, Susan Retik, to help Afghan women widowed in the ensuing US invasion.

In the course of their work, Quigley and Jan met, and Quigley decided to help with the school to prevent future generations from despair and violence. Neither she nor Jan is paid for their work; the money raised goes directly to the school.

"It's hard," says Quigley, of the fund-raising, "but there's definitely a group of people

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RAZIA JAN
About her school

around here who get why we're doing what we're doing."

So why are they?

"It's making a difference in girls' and women's lives," says Jan. "This area has never had a girls' school. It took a couple of years for the parents to get used to their daughters attending classes, especially since 90 percent of those parents can't write their own names."

The school accepts kindergartners through seventh-graders, but the plan is to add another grade each year through grade 12. When the school is finished — five more grades — Jan hopes for more than 600 girls. School is free, and the 12 teachers have 316 girls right now. The students start learning English at age 4.

"English is a tool that can take them a long way," says Jan. "It's a must for their future; it makes the path much easier."

The Taliban has burned scores of girls' schools in Afghanistan, thrown acid at girls en route to school, and just this May killed the head teacher of a school. Jan says that the Zabuli School is in a conservative, but not Taliban-controlled, area.

Though it took them awhile to embrace girls' education, fathers and brothers now thank the school for helping the girls learn so much, she says. Every several months, Jan and the teachers sit and talk to the village elders about the school.

But last summer, she spent 12 days in Pashtun, Taliban territory, trying to talk to them about the school. "They would-

lutely don't want the girls out the house."

When she speaks of the girls, Jan's face lights up. "It's a joy," she says. "These girls are as normal students and kids as they can be. They so want to learn, they have so many good questions."

She's also helping Afghan women, many of them war widows, through her other nonprofit, Arzu, whose American office is in Chicago; she flew there after her recent Duxbury fundraiser, and then on to fund-raisers in Washington and Tulsa. Arzu provides women with education, social programs, and health care and teaches vocations such as rug-weaving and baking.

Jan lives in Kabul most of the year and has had a few close calls. Five minutes after she left a store, it was blown up and a doctor and his wife and four children whom she knew were killed.

Across the street from her house, a suicide bomber blew himself up. Once, she was in the Ministry of Education when the building next door was bombed. She knows the country is a war zone and that's why she thinks her school is especially vital.

"As small as it is, it's making a difference in women's lives," she says.

Jan has no family in Afghanistan except the stray dog she adopted. Most of her friends are here, many of them on the South Shore and in Wellesley and Concord. "It gives me that boost of energy when I come here and see everyone I know," she says. "It's like a tonic; it keeps me going until the next time I come."

For more information, go to raziasrayofhope.org.

Globe columnist Bella English lives in Milton. She can be

Razia Jan opened the Zabuli Education Center in her homeland of Afghanistan four years ago to educate girls.

